

## Testimony

### Raised Bill No. SB 1138 An Act Concerning Strengthening School Bullying Laws

My name is Dana Mulligan and I currently serve as an assistant principal at Woodland Region High School in Regional School District 16- a participating member of the Connecticut Association of Schools. Prior to moving to Woodland, I worked at Hamden High School for eleven years both as an administrator and teacher. Woodland and Hamden may differ in size and demographic characteristics, but the teachers and school leaders share the common burden of combating bullying that can be disruptive to the learning environment and may inhibit students from reaching their full potential.

Positive and nurturing school climates are created when school leaders and teachers foster an environment of mutual respect. Eliminating meanness and demonstrating a lack of tolerance for hurtful and disrespectful interactions require consistent effort on behalf of all the members of a school community including administrators, teachers, students and parent/guardians. The campaign to end mean and hurtful behavior is fought daily within our schools and it is a message that needs to be reiterated on a daily basis. Requiring school districts to develop and implement policies and plans that will foster safe and respectful school climates would be an innovative step in what I would consider the civic and social education of our youth. Requiring local and regional boards of education to assess the quality of the school climate recognizes that the school climate is an important factor in successful learning and teaching.

Reporting the incidents of bullying allows state and school administrators to track incidents that are reported to them by students that are willing to make a complaint, but it does not help with the thousands of incidents that go unreported. Many unreported hurtful and disrespectful interactions take place inside and outside of school on a daily basis. Cyberbullying has increased dramatically over the past few years. More and more students have access to interactive and digital technologies. The evolution of social networking sites has led to an increase of mean-spirited and harassing behaviors taking place outside of the school day. The majority of peer conflicts that require mediation stem from a comment on Facebook or a text message that was received outside of school hours. Rarely do these conflicts result in a formal bullying complaint, but instead a great deal of time is dedicated to counseling students toward more appropriate and less hurtful behavior. Administratively, our hands are often tied when it comes to hurtful behaviors that have taken place in the cyber world after school hours. We often suggest that parents contact local law enforcement because the cyber world is not within, nor should it be, within our jurisdiction. Educating our students about the appropriate use of technology and the effects of hurtful verbal, non-verbal, and physical interactions should be the focus of this legislation.

The school environment specialist as it is defined in the legislation is of great concern. While school counselors and psychologists are trained to deal with a variety of behaviors and crises, the responsibilities placed upon the specialist are administrative in nature. School counselors and psychologist serve a very important function in promoting a safe school environment and should not have their roles confused with building level administration. This role could inadvertently deter some

student from seeking help from their counselor or school psychologist. The additional burden would also take away from the important duties already performed by these individuals and would likely result in an additional financial stipend which few districts are in a position to add to already contested budgets. The concern that I have with the creation of a separate school environment team is that it will create a belief and practice that not all school community members are responsible for the school climate. It would be more appropriate to include the school climate as part of the school improvement plan which would then place ownership on the entire school community. It is also encourages schools to consider the school climate as an integral, not separate, part of improving teaching and learning.

Woodland Regional High School traditionally invites the Anti-Defamation League "Names Can Really Hurt" program to speak with students about meanness, bullying and harassment. We have an advisory program in place that includes establishing values that support a positive school climate. Our staff, administration and board of education work hard to offer programs that will continue to educate our students in the areas of physical, emotional and intellectual trust and safety for all of our school community. We are taking steps in the right direction, but we are fighting against technology and social media that evolves and changes at a rapid pace. Focusing on single programs and one day events will not have the lasting effect that this legislature is hoping for. Ongoing curriculum and school improvement plans that include fostering positive school climates will assist administrators and teachers in the continuous efforts to protect children and to promote learning.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Dana Mulligan

Woodland Regional High School-RSD 16

Assistant Principal